



EQAF 2008: Panel Discussion with the E4 Presidency

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May I first express my thanks to Corvinus University, and especially to Rector Meszáros, for hosting the EQAF 2008 Conference and for their support and hospitality. I would also like to thank and congratulate the Chair and the members of the Steering Committee for the excellent job they did in organizing such a successful conference.

Since the beginning of discussions on Quality Assurance within the Bologna Process some years ago, the position of EURASHE has always been that all aspects of QA, i.e. standards, processes/procedures and bodies, must reflect and involve all types of Higher Education Institutions. Consequently, we favour and support Classification of European HEIs, and we consider that in the EHEA, such a classification is more appropriate than ranking. To this end, EURASHE has been actively involved in initiatives for classification/mapping of HEIs, e.g. in projects of CHEPS, OECD, etc.

We understand that there are views that do not favour Classification of HEIs in the EHEA. We would, therefore, very briefly counter such arguments, as follows:

Argument 1: Classification is not specifically helpful for the underprivileged in education. It tends to give more competitive advantage to those learners who are already well-informed -- it helps them to make faster decisions.

Reply: This is not a well-founded and convincing argument. On the contrary, we must strive for a transparent EHEA, which gives complete and trustworthy information to all learners; Classification of HEIs will certainly provide such transparent information. In addition, it will help underprivileged groups to catch up and improve their knowledge.

Argument 2: A Classification will be in conflict to existing Bologna reform instruments, mainly to QA; it will make them look superfluous, since, for example, reviews of institutions in themselves are enough to guarantee transparency.

Reply: A Classification of HEI will contribute to putting a HEI in a global context, i.e. benchmarking; it will enable reviewers to refine their criteria based on the type of institution they are reviewing. Therefore, unfair comparisons could be avoided.

Argument 3: A Classification will create obstacles to mobility of students. HEIs that will have a different from others profile -- unchangeable, because of their position in a certain category -- will be excluded from mobility programmes with HEIs of a different type, e.g. academic vs professional.

Reply: A proper Classification of HEIs will put every institution in its proper category, where it would have the opportunity to excel, according to its mission and profile. A HEI with a good record in mobility will not lose it because of a clear profile. In addition, a Classification will be particularly helpful to stimulate 'vertical' (degree) mobility, which has been growing more and more important than the 'horizontal' (Erasmus) mobility.

However, developing and formulating a Classification of HEIs is not an easy or danger-free task, therefore, a number of traps/dangers should be avoided, such as:

1. Generalisations:

Classification of HEIs in a cross-cultural context is a difficult exercise. The clusters that are made should be relevant, e.g. clustering together all countries speaking the same language with the purpose of making a classification using as classification criterion this common trait, may not be meaningful in view of the different legal and societal context of the different countries.

2. Extremes:

Multi-dimensional classification that is based on extremes must be avoided, e.g. professional vs academic where fading borderlines are certainly a reality.

3. Incorrect/inappropriate use of the Classification of HEIs, e.g. by governments, employers, students, etc.

Such examples could be:

GVTs: To use it as a ground for allocating funding.

HEIs: To pursue a specific classification profile because it would be more rewarding (more funding, more students, etc.)

Students: To influence their choice for an institution for wrong reasons, without checking properly its profile in terms of its suitability to their needs and goals.

Consequently, a good and appropriate classification system has to be:

1. Student-Centred (student being any learner who wishes to attain -- or improve within the framework of life-long-learning -- a qualification in higher education). Therefore, Classification of HEIs should not create a disadvantage to those learners who do not have proper access to information. It must not focus on

what the institution wants to offer, but on how the student can best take advantage of what is available at an institution, e.g. in terms of programmes offered, available expertise of teachers, available resources and facilities, etc.

2. Revealing several (not just one) areas of excellence of a HEI.
3. Evidence-based, with measurable and verifiable features.
4. Purpose-built, e.g. what will the classification be used for, who and in which order, and which objectives would be achieved.
5. Stimulating proper profiling of a HEI, e.g. facilitating data collection, stimulating a mission development that meets local and national needs of the population and is in accordance with the justified wishes of all stakeholders (including employers), etc.
6. Involving all stakeholders in its development and formulation.

In conclusion, I would say that there are more variants in higher education than what 'unitary' and 'binary' systems of HE can reveal. Europe, in general, and EHEA, in particular, could certainly benefit from manifestly demonstrating their diversity. This is only possible through a greater transparency that is generally acknowledged by all stakeholders. A complete and impartial Classification of Higher Education Institutions can greatly contribute towards creating such a transparency.